

## DESCENDANTS OF THE DRAGON: THE DRAGON AS A SYMBOL OF CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY\*

<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2023.32.1.04>

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Daniel ZHANG CZIRÁKOVÁ

Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences

Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava

ORCID: 0000-0002-1813-0546

daniela.zhang98@gmail.com

The dragon has a unique position in Chinese mythology and it used to be a symbol of the emperor. This article explores the Chinese attitude to the dragon as a mythical ancestor of all Chinese. It focuses on the popular song “Descendants of the Dragon” by the Taiwanese singer Hou Dejian and its influence on Chinese national identity. The song was created in 1978 and became popular. Later, the dragon became the symbol of Chinese people resident not only in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) but also Chinese people living in Taiwan as well as in the Chinese diaspora. The song appeared at the right time when the longing for the motherland by Chinese people living in Taiwan correlated with the political need of the PRC to find a common symbol. The dragon as an apolitical mythological creature has been adopted as a common ancestor for all Chinese people on the basis of its lyrics. It has been used in the PRC since 1988 to replace political narratives, reinforce the feeling of national identity and find features connecting all Chinese people around the world. A new version of the song shows the attitude of those who have been born and have grown up outside of China but still consider themselves the heirs of Chinese culture and traditions.

**Keywords:** China, dragon, symbol, national identity, song, music, mythology, Taiwan, diaspora

### Introduction

In the West, the dragon is often considered a symbol of China, like the elephant in India or the bear in Russia. In China, the dragon used to be considered a cultural heritage of China more than a symbol of the Chinese nation. However, the

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\* This study is published within the grant projects VEGA 2/0027/22 and VEGA 2/0053/20 of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

symbolism of the dragon has been much more ambiguous. In the West, the dragon is usually a negative mythical animal, breathing fire. It is often associated with the devil, but in some parts of the Far East, the dragon is perceived as a positive force, bringing rain. Therefore, it was worshipped in prehistoric times, as a part of the ritual of praying for rain. One of the most ancient images of the dragon was found in a tomb in 1987 in Puyang, 濮陽 Henan province, and it dates from the early Neolithic Yangshao culture, approximately 5000 BCE. It shows that in the Yangshao culture people already paid respect to dragons.<sup>1</sup> The first written mentions of the dragon are found in very ancient Chinese texts, on oracle bones, *jiaguwen* 甲骨文. In Chinese sources, a snake is often called a “small dragon”. This shows that the dragon did not originate from the snake.<sup>2</sup> According to Wang Dayou, the early pictogram for the “dragon” (long 龍) is not derived from the pictogram “snake” (she 蛇). Wang believes the dragon originated from alligators and it used to be a totem animal of noble families in prehistoric times.<sup>3</sup> However, as Shi Aidong pointed out,<sup>4</sup> due to the lack of written sources, it is very difficult to prove any of these hypotheses before the Qin dynasty (221 BCE – 206 BCE).

The dragon was a divine vehicle that was used to transport Chinese ancient rulers in the Xia dynasty to Heaven. Shellach mentions, that since the Xia dynasty in the 21st century BCE. the dragon started to be associated with the royal family as their ancestor. That strengthened the position of the dragon in China.<sup>5</sup> Some early emperors were considered to have been born as a result of the sexual intercourse of their mother with a dragon, like the founder of the Han dynasty. As Sima Qian mentioned in his *Historian’s Records*, the mother of Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, became pregnant after a dragon visited her in her

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<sup>1</sup> XIAO, Xingmin 肖興敏. “Long” de wenhua chayi “龍” 的文化差異 [Cultural Differences of the “Dragon”]. In *Wenxuejie*, 2010, p. 154. [online] [cit. 3 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.cnki.net>.

<sup>2</sup> WANG, Dayou 王大有. 龍鳳文化源流 *Long Feng wenhua yuanliu* [Origin and Development of the Dragon and Phoenix Cultures], p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> WANG, Dayou 王大有. 龍鳳文化源流. *Long Feng wenhua yuanliu* [Origin and Development of the Dragon and Phoenix Cultures], p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> An interview with Shi Aidong 施愛東, Literary Institute of CASS, Beijing, 6 November 2018.

<sup>5</sup> DHARMA KEERTHI SRI RANJAN, D. G., ZHOU, Chang C. The Chinese Dragon Concept as a Spiritual Force of Masses. In *Sabaragamuwa University Journal*, 2010, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 65–80, p. 73.

dream.<sup>6</sup> In dynastic China, the dragon used to refer to the emperor, called the Son of Heaven, also “the true dragon” (a true Dragon as the Son of Heaven).<sup>7</sup>

Later, the dragon was established as a symbol of the emperor. Links between the dragon and the imperial family and the dynasty started to be more official from the period of the Yuan dynasty (1271 – 1368 CE). Since then, the use of the image of the dragon was prohibited for ordinary people. The restrictions on using the image of the dragon became more rigid during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The image of the dragon as a symbol of the emperor was quite evident during the Qing dynasty, and it appeared on the first national flag of China.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, by the end of the dynasty, various caricatures mocking the dragon, showing it in humiliating situations appeared in caricatures, as a protest against the weak government.<sup>9</sup> It was aimed against the Manchu government, not against the Chinese nation. In opposition to the government, Chinese patriots also used an image of the Yellow Emperor (Yan Huang 炎黃), and the saying “we are all heirs of Yan Huang” came into being. The question of anti-Manchu and national identity lost its meaning after the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911.

During the anti-Japanese war, there was a strong need to create a new symbol including not only the Chinese nation but also the Manchu and other nations living in China, to rouse national feelings and help in the struggle against the common enemy. In those times, Chinese intellectuals considered a common mythical ancestor or another symbol. However, the dragon was only one option among mythological creatures, apart from the qilin 麒麟,<sup>10</sup> and phoenix (which was more understood as a female creature, as it used to be connected with the empress). Real animals, like the tiger, the crane and others were also considered.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> SIMA, Qian, 司馬遷. *Shi ji 史記* [Records of the Grand Historian], Vol. 28. [online] [cit. 21 November 2022]. Available from <http://www.guoxue.com/book/shiji/0008.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> WU, Guanjun. Descendants of a Blurry-Eyed Dragon. In *The Great Dragon Fantasy: A Lacanian Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Thought*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> DHARMA KEERTHI SRI RANJAN, D. G., ZHOU, Chang C. The Chinese Dragon Concept as a Spiritual Force of the Masses. In *Sabaragamuwa University Journal*, 2010, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> SHI, Aidong 施愛東. *16–20 shiji de long zhengzhi yu Zhongguo xingxiang 16–20 世界的龍政治與中國形象* [The Politics of the Dragon during the 16th to 20th Centuries and the Image of China], pp. 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> A Chinese “unicorn” is sometimes depicted with two horns.

<sup>11</sup> In this context, I should mention that from ancient times there has been another prominent symbol common to all Chinese: the bat as a symbol of good luck. But it is assumed that it was not suitable as an emblem of Chinese identity. See further in BENICKÁ, Jana. The Bat as a Chinese Symbol of Happiness/Supernatural Blessing and Immortality. In *The Role of Animals and Mythological Creatures in Global Cultures*, pp. 128–145.

After the end of the war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country had different challenges to deal with and there was no need for such a symbol of the unique Chinese nation.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of searching for a common symbol of the Chinese nation was forgotten until the mid-1980s. At that time, the Chinese economy was expanding as a result of reforms and modernisations. It was a period of economic pragmatism and the search for a common symbol, apolitical, and therefore acceptable to all Chinese people, not only those in the PRC, but also including expats living in various countries, as well as the Chinese living in Taiwan and Hong Kong, started again.

The popular song *Descendants of the Dragon* 龍的傳人 originated in Taiwan and solved the problem. Thanks to several coincidences, the dragon started to be considered not only as a symbol of all Chinese people but also as their ancestor, a common feature connecting all Chinese no matter where they might be living. Given that the dragon is a mythological animal which never existed, one might ask why not choose a real animal instead, to consider as an ancestor? The answer to this question lies in Chinese history and culture. Despite the fact that the dragon is not a real animal, the belief in the dragon was strong and even at the beginning of the 20th century more than 80 per cent of people in China firmly believed in its real existence.<sup>13</sup> The word “dragon” 龍 is used in many geographical names in China, such as Heilongjiang River<sup>14</sup> and in Heilongjiang province there are more than 10,000 cities and villages with a “dragon” in their names. The word dragon is also a frequent part of many Chinese names, especially in the field of martial arts, such as the famous actors in *kongfu* movies, Li Xiaolong 李小龍 (Bruce Lee), and Chen Long 陳龍 (Jacky Chen).<sup>15</sup> During a lecture given by the

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<sup>12</sup> ZHANG CZIRÁKOVÁ, D. Drak ako symbol čínskej národnej identity a jeho zobrazovanie v čínskom umení. Úvod do problematiky [The Dragon as a Symbol of Chinese National Identity, its Symbolics and Representation in Chinese Visual Art. An Introduction]. In BUCKOVÁ, M. (ed.). *Reflexia mytologických motívov v duchovnej a materiálnej kultúre národov Ázie, Afriky a Oceánie* [The Reflection of Mythological Motifs in the Material and Non-Material Culture of the Nations of Asia, Africa and Oceania], p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> HAYES, L. N. *The Chinese Dragon*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> 黑龍江, which literally means “the River of the Black Dragon”.

<sup>15</sup> Li Xiaolong literary means “Li Little Dragon”. The name Chen Long 陳龍 can be explained further, because if the surname Chen is pronounced as the word “cheng”, the meaning is “to become a dragon” *cheng long* 成龍. For more information see ZHANG CZIRÁKOVÁ, D. Drak ako symbol čínskej národnej identity a jeho zobrazovanie v čínskom umení. Úvod do problematiky [The Dragon as a Symbol of Chinese National Identity, its Symbolics and Representation in Chinese Visual Art. An Introduction]. In

present author and the following discussion at the Historical Institute, CASS in Beijing,<sup>16</sup> the historian Zhu Jianli compared the dragon to Jehovah from the Old Testament, which shows that there is a cultural and even to some extent a religious connotation to the dragon for Chinese people.

### **The Song by Hou Dejian and Chinese Cultural Identity in Taiwan**

The popular belief in dragons is deeply rooted in Chinese society and nearly every period of life is connected in some way with this mythological saurian.<sup>17</sup> However, according to Sautman, the dragon was never considered the ancestor and symbol of all Chinese people and attempts to identify the Chinese nation with the dragon only began in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Chinese parents only started to prefer having children born in the year of the dragon<sup>19</sup> from 1976 outside of the PRC and from 1988 in mainland China.<sup>20</sup> It seems that the idea of ordinary people's connection with the dragon first appeared in Taiwan. After the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the government of the Republic of China (ROC) left the mainland when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) declared the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Guomindang retreated to Taiwan and declared Taipei the temporary capital of the ROC. At that time, many Chinese left China for Taiwan. Therefore, Taiwanese cultural identity after 1949 was built mostly on the Chinese cultural heritage. However, the question of national identity was present in Taiwan much earlier than 1949.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the 19th century,

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BUCKOVÁ, M. (ed.). *Reflexia mytologických motívov v duchovnej a materiálnej kultúre národov Ázie, Afriky a Oceánie* [The Reflection of Mythological Motifs in the Material and Non-Material Culture of the Nations of Asia, Africa and Oceania], p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Historical Institute of CASS, 8 November 2018.

<sup>17</sup> HAYES, L. N. *The Chinese Dragon*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> SAUTMAN, B. Myths of Descent, Racial Nationalism and Ethnic Minorities in the People's Republic of China. In DIKÖTTER, F. (ed.). *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> The Chinese lunar calendar consists of 12 animals. Each year is devoted to one of them, so the year of the dragon occurs every 12 years. Each animal has its characteristics, as in the Western horoscope. Some of them are considered to be more desirable, therefore people tend to plan their childbirth according to the lunar year.

<sup>20</sup> GOODKIND, D. Creating new Traditions in Modern Chinese Populations: Aiming for Birth in the Year of the Dragon. In *Population and Development Review*, 1991, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 663–686.

<sup>21</sup> For further information see BENICKÁ, J. *Taiwanci, Japonci alebo Čňania? O taiwanskej spoločnosti počas japonskej okupácie očami spisovateľa Wu Zhuoliua 吳濁流 (1900 – 1976) [Taiwanese, Japanese or Chinese? On Taiwanese Society during*

Taiwan was under Chinese administration followed by Japanese occupation (1885 – 1945). After 1949, the island faced several waves of migration from the mainland. Apart from that, Taiwanese identity was challenged by the tension between the immigrants (Waishengren or Mainlanders) and native Taiwanese (also called Neishengren). Since the early 1990s, the government in Taiwan has been trying to create a Taiwanese identity, including the indigenisation of Mainlanders,<sup>22</sup> many of whom, especially the older generation, felt marginalised or stigmatised. On the other hand, the native Taiwanese majority Hokko felt uncomfortable during the decades of Mainlander domination in political and cultural life.<sup>23</sup> The complicated status of Mainlanders, although they were privileged after 1949, led to the view that they are actually part of the Chinese diaspora in Taiwan.<sup>24</sup>

From a political point of view, the Republic of China in Taiwan represented China in the United Nations until 1971 when it was replaced by the People's Republic of China. As a result, most foreign countries started to establish diplomatic relations with China and therefore the international status of Taiwan became less stable and more vulnerable.<sup>25</sup> In 1978, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with the government of the ROC in Taiwan, which disappointed ordinary people living in Taiwan, and many of them felt betrayed.

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the Japanese Occupation as Seen by the Writer Zhuoliu (1900 – 1976)]. In *Studia Orientalia Slovaca*, 2005, Vol. IV, pp. 126–127.

<sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive study of issues related to the indigenisation of Mainlanders in Taiwan (bentuhua), see MAKEHAM, J., HSIAU, A. (eds.). *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentuhua*, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> YANG, D. Meng-Hsuang, CHANG, Mau-Kuei. *Understanding the Nuances of Waishengren. History and Agency. China Perspectives*, 2010, Vol. 3, pp. 113–114. [online] [cit. 6 April 2023]. Available from <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5310>.

<sup>24</sup> See further in SCOTT, S. Taiwan's Mainlanders: A Diasporic Identity in Construction. In *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 2006, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 87–105. [online] [cit. 6 April 2023]. Available from <https://journals.openedition.org/remi/2715?lang=en>.

<sup>25</sup> Nowadays the policy in most countries is that they have official diplomatic relationships with the PRC based on the statement of “one China policy”. Taiwanese representative offices are based in many countries and they are presented as economic representative offices. However, ROC in Taiwan has an independent visa policy: they issue their passports and the visa policy of foreign countries, for example Slovakia, towards citizens of the ROC differs from those of the PRC.

The campus folk song<sup>26</sup> “Descendants of the Dragon”<sup>27</sup> was composed by Hou Dejian (侯德建) in December 1978 during his university studies to protest against the U.S. government’s decision. It immediately became a hit and gained instant national fame in Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> The song was first recorded by the singer Li Jianfu, (Lee Chien-fu 李建復), at that time a student, and it quickly caught on in Taiwan.<sup>29</sup>

Hou’s lyrics expressed his feelings, including a nostalgia and longing for the motherland of China as a part of his cultural identity together with his sense of bitterness and resentment. The song captured all the sentiment that was in the air at that time. It was not the only patriotic song during that period. The feeling of loss of political status and stability created a need for these types of songs to reassure people about their cultural heritage and national identity. By the 1970s, the younger generation of Chinese born in Taiwan, whose parents came from the mainland, had never seen China and all they knew were the traces of inherited memories of the mainland. This sentiment is present in the song, too. Hou admits his spiritual travels in his dreams. The images of the Yangzi<sup>30</sup> and Yellow rivers have been imprinted on his mind.

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<sup>26</sup> The campus folk song was popular in 1980 as a part of falling international status. See more in WANG, G. The Recording Industry: Popular Music in Taiwan. In *Critical Studies of Mass Communication*, 1986, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 366–368.

<sup>27</sup> Also translated as “Heirs of the Dragon”.

<sup>28</sup> WU, T. K. Heirs of the Dragon by Hou Dejian. In *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1985, Vol. 17, Issue 3, pp. 28–29.

<sup>29</sup> *Long de chuanren 龍的傳人 heirs of the dragon*. [online] [Cit. 23 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>. See also CHOU, O. Rallying Cry of an Oppressed Nation: 1980s Hit Song Still Captures Chinese Hearts 35 Years on, Taiwanese Singer Lee Chien-Fu Says. In *South China Morning Post*, 11 November 2015. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/1877743/rallying-cry-oppressed-nation-1980s-hit-song>. For the song by Li Jianfu see Li Jianfu 李建復 – *Long De Chuan Ren 《龙的传人 | 龍的傳人》* [Descendants of the Dragon] with English subtitles, YouTube, 20 August 2017. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGv7SiRa0Uo&ab\\_channel=SamsaraChomolungma](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGv7SiRa0Uo&ab_channel=SamsaraChomolungma).

<sup>30</sup> Yangzi River, also Changjiang 長江. In the lyrics, the translator used the old transcription Yangtze, which has been changed to Yangzi here.

**龍的傳人 Heirs of the Dragon**

作詞：侯德健 作曲：侯德健

Music and Lyrics by Hou Dejian

遙遠的東方有一條江

它的名字就叫長江

遙遠的東方有一條河

它的名字就叫黃河

In the Far East, there is a river,

its name is the Yangzi River

In the Far East, there is a river,

its name is the Yellow River

雖不曾看見長江美

夢裡常神遊長江水

雖不曾聽見黃河壯

澎湃洶湧在夢裡

Although I've never seen the beauty of the Yangzi,

in my dreams, I miraculously travel the Yangzi's waters

Although I've never heard the strength of the Yellow River,

the rushing and surging waters are in my dreams

古老的東方有一條龍

她的名字就叫中國

古老的東方有一群人

他們全都是龍的傳人

In the Ancient East, there is a dragon,

her name is China.

In the Ancient East there is a people,

they are all the heirs of the dragon

巨龍腳底下我成長

長成以後是龍的傳人

黑眼睛黑頭髮黃皮膚

永永遠遠是龍的傳人

I grew up under the claw of the dragon,

after I grew up I became an heir of the dragon

Black eyes, black hair, yellow skin,

forever and ever an heir of the dragon



百年前寧靜的一個夜  
巨變前夕的深夜裡  
槍砲聲敲碎了寧靜夜  
四面楚歌是姑息的劍

One hundred years ago on a tranquil night,  
in the deep of the night before enormous changes  
Gun and cannon fire destroyed the tranquil night,  
surrounded on all sides by the appeasers' swords

多少年砲聲仍隆隆  
多少年又是多少年  
巨龍巨龍你擦亮眼  
永永遠遠的擦亮眼

How many years have gone by with the gunshots still ringing out,  
how many years followed by how many years.  
Mighty dragon, mighty dragon open your eyes,  
forever and ever open your eyes.<sup>31</sup>

The image of the dragon touches the essence of being Chinese, reinforced by the mention of the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers. Although most people in Taiwan never visited the mainland when the song was popular, the places are firmly ingrained in their collective memory.<sup>32</sup> Then the author comes up with the idea of the Chinese as the heirs of the dragon. Since “dragon” symbolises the Han people,<sup>33</sup> the song arouses patriotism and a deep desire in Taiwan to restore the mainland, the land of beautiful culture.<sup>34</sup> Chinese artists and poets have regularly utilised the resource of a musical performance to make new sense of the history of their nation.<sup>35</sup> Longing for the mainland, being cut off from the friends and families living in the PRC was a common feeling shared by the Chinese who emigrated to Taiwan but still felt themselves a part of Chinese culture. Hou Dejian used the dragon as a symbol to express the view that the Chinese living in Taiwan are the true representatives of China's cultural heritage and the heirs of

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<sup>31</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>.

<sup>32</sup> CHANG, Hui-Ching, HOLT, R. *Repositioning of “Taiwan” and “China”. An Analysis of Patriotic Songs in Taiwan*, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> The Han people are ethnic Chinese.

<sup>34</sup> CHANG, Hui-Ching, HOLT, R. *Language, Politics and Identity in Taiwan: Naming China*, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> STOCK, P. J. J. Four Recurring Themes in Histories of Chinese Music. In BOHLMAN, P. V. (ed.). *The Cambridge History of World Music*, p. 412.

the real dragon. At that time, the aim was to raise the self-confidence of people living in Taiwan, which started to lose its international status and to reinforce national self-esteem. The message of the song was simple: no matter what happened or what is going to happen in the future, the Chinese living in Taiwan are the descendants of the dragon, heirs of the ancient Chinese culture. The last part of the song evokes the pain of being deceived. The bullets in a tranquil night one hundred years ago reflect painful memories of the Opium wars when China was attacked and defeated by foreign armies. The lyrics here resonate with the disappointment of ordinary people in Taiwan with the decision of many states to break off official diplomatic relations with Taiwan in order to favour the PRC and the feeling of being betrayed by Westerners once more. The idea of national identity in this song is strongly connected with Chinese ancient culture, which used to be typical for Mainlanders.

The Descendants of the Dragon is a “brooding but patriotic folk anthem”,<sup>36</sup> which gradually became incredibly popular among the Chinese not only in Taiwan and mainland China but also in the Chinese overseas diaspora. According to Chow, the sentiment of the song fitted in the narrative of the Chinese government’s attempt to find a common symbol that would unite not only the Chinese in the PRC but also the Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas. It also fed the global diasporic longing for the perceived homeland.<sup>37</sup> The lyrics were changed several times. Firstly, Hou Dejian altered the part “appeasers’ swords” (姑息的劍), from the original “foreigners’ swords”, due to censorship by the ROC in Taiwan in 1978.<sup>38</sup> There are several versions of the song available, for example by patriotic singer Zhang Mingmin (張明敏) in Hong Kong,<sup>39</sup> and Tan Yonglin 譚詠麟.<sup>40</sup> More significant changes were made in a version by Leehom Wang in 2000, which will be discussed later.

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<sup>36</sup> BARMÉ, G. R. *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, p. 221.

<sup>37</sup> CHOW, Yiu Fai. *Me and the Dragon: a Lyrical Engagement with the Politics of Chineseness*, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> HOZHY 龍的傳人. Hozhy’s Blog, 4 June 2010. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <https://hozhy.wordpress.com/2010/06/04/%E9%BE%8D%E7%9A%84%E5%82%B3%E4%BA%BA>.

<sup>39</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Ddragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>. For the song see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7UB0mqZbOs&ab\\_channel=SamsaraChomolungma](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7UB0mqZbOs&ab_channel=SamsaraChomolungma).

<sup>40</sup> This version is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNrtmXqHHLc&ab\\_channel=JamesBond](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNrtmXqHHLc&ab_channel=JamesBond).

## The Dragon as a Symbol of the Chinese Nation in the PRC

Since the late 1970s, traditional symbols like the dragon, the Yellow River, and the Great Wall gradually started to replace the previous politically motivated rhetoric of the Communist Party.<sup>41</sup> These symbols gradually started to replace the revolutionary symbolism of the 1950s and the period of the Cultural Revolution. To many Chinese in mainland China, the song “Descendants of the Dragon” celebrated their historical and cultural uniqueness.<sup>42</sup> The government of the PRC started its attempt to establish the dragon as a symbol unifying all Chinese people defined by their “Chineseness”, or in the words of the song “black eyes, black hair and yellow skin”.<sup>43</sup> The adaptation of the symbolism of the song became even easier when the author moved to China. In 1983, Hou Dejian violated the Guomindang’s travel restrictions and moved to mainland China.<sup>44</sup> It caused the banning of his song in Taiwan until martial law ended in 1987,<sup>45</sup> but it increased its popularity in the PRC. “Descendants of the Dragon” became a hit in China, where it was adopted as an expression of Chinese nationalism and the importance of reunification.<sup>46</sup> Ten years after the song was written, when it had already lost its political bitterness, the idea of the Chinese as descendants of the dragon started to spread in mainland China. During preparations for the Chinese lunar year of the dragon in 1988, the idea coming from the song became more evident and the image of the dragon as the ancestor of all Chinese became official policy in

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<sup>41</sup> We can observe a similar shift in the names of the Chinese space programme. Strong political messages used in the past, such as the Long March have been replaced by names originating in mythology, such as the Celestial ship Shen Zhou (神舟). See also OBUCHOVÁ, L. Čínsky vesmírny program a mytologické názvoslovie [The Chinese Space Programme and Mythological Terminology]. In BUCKOVÁ, M. (ed.) *Reflexia mytologických motívov v duchovnej a materiálnej kultúre národov Ázie, Afriky a Oceánie* [The Reflection of Mythological Motifs in the Material and Non-Material Culture of the Nations of Asia, Africa and Oceania], pp. 78–112.

<sup>42</sup> WU, Guanjun. Descendants of a Blurry-Eyed Dragon. In *The Great Dragon Fantasy: A Lacanian Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Thought*, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> SAUTMAN, B. Myths of Descent, Racial Nationalism and Ethnic Minorities in the People’s Republic of China. In DIKÖTTER, F. (ed.). *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> His departure in June of 1983 caused a big controversy in Taiwan. See further in WU, T. K. Heirs of the Dragon by Hou Dejian. In *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1985, Vol. 17, Issue 3, pp. 28–29.

<sup>45</sup> CHANG, Hui-Ching, HOLT, R. *Language, Politics and Identity in Taiwan: Naming China*, p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>.

mainland China. At the beginning of the 1988 lunar year of the dragon, the song was chosen for an official New Year's programme in the PRC. Hou Dejian sang the song "Descendants of the Dragon" during a huge gala program on the Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve in February.<sup>47</sup> As Wang Qi, an art historian said, "The dragon is not a political symbol, it's a symbol of Chinese culture and the Chinese people – we are very proud to be descendants of the dragon".<sup>48</sup> The symbol of the dragon was appropriated by the ethnic Chinese nation. Not only does the dragon represent all ethnic Chinese (of Han nationality), but it has been used for all ethnic groups living in China, even though some of them have never been connected with the dragon and had their own totem animals.<sup>49</sup> Since the Chinese lunar year of the Dragon in 1988, the symbolism of the dragon as an ancestor of all Chinese has become more and more relevant in the political arena.

However, the song was not used only by Chinese politicians. It was sung during the student movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989, where it became a protest anthem before the bloody crackdown of 4 June.<sup>50</sup> In May 1989, at a concert in Hong Kong to support the students in Beijing, Hou made two changes to the lyrics. In the line "surrounded on all sides by the appeasers' swords", he replaced "appeasers" with "dictators" (四面楚歌是獨裁的劍). The second change was even more significant as it concerned non-Chinese ethnic minorities. "Black hair, black eyes, yellow skin" changed to "Whether you are willing or not, forever and ever an heir of the dragon" (不管你自己願不願意，永永遠遠是龍

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<sup>47</sup> TYSON, J. L. Fiery Symbol of Chinese Culture Comes into Its Own in 'Year of the Dragon'. In *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 January 1988. [online] [cit. 3 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.csmonitor.com/1988/0111/odrag.html>.

<sup>48</sup> TYSON, J. L. Fiery Symbol of Chinese Culture Comes into Its Own in 'Year of the Dragon'. In *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 January 1988. [online] [cit. 3 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.csmonitor.com/1988/0111/odrag.html>

<sup>49</sup> ZHANG, Ke 張克. Gulaode Dongfang you yitiao long 古老的東方有一條龍 [There was a Dragon in the Ancient East]. In ZHANG, Ke 張克 (ed.). *Long 龍* [Dragon], Guiyang, Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Hou became deeply involved in the movement and he helped lead a hunger strike in the square, which began on 2 June. Because of his actions, he was deported from China back to Taiwan in 1990. See further in *Long de chuanren 龍的傳人* [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>. See also CHOU, O. Rallying Cry of an Oppressed Nation: 1980s Hit Song Still Captures Chinese Hearts 35 Years on, Taiwanese Singer Lee Chien-Fu Says. In *South China Morning Post*, 11 November 2015. [online] [cit. 23 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/1877743/rallying-cry-oppressed-nation-1980s-hit-song>.

的傳人). Unfortunately, a later remake by Leehom Wang did not include this change.<sup>51</sup>

In 1990, Hou was expelled to Taiwan because he had participated in the democratic movement, but the song surprisingly was not banned in mainland China. The record of the song was played in the background at the 14th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1992, when a new Politburo Standing Committee was introduced.<sup>52</sup> When the song was appropriated as a song with pro-Chinese feelings, Hou Dejian claimed that “it completely misread his intention”.<sup>53</sup> The sentence “we are all descendants of the dragon” has been incorporated into narratives of the PRC and it has been repeatedly used till now. The preparations for the 2024 year of the dragon have already started, at least online, and the website shows a photo from the New Lunar Year celebration in 1988, where Hou Dejian sang the song. The website includes several links to newspapers that Xi Jinping used, for example in 2017, during the official visit of Donald Trump and his wife to China. Xi has claimed several times, that “all Chinese are descendants of the dragon”:<sup>54</sup> Besides records of the political speeches, there is also a link to a free book discussing the controversy about the translation of the word “dragon” into English.<sup>55</sup> A similar issue is mentioned by Chinese scholars such as Wu You-fu from Shanghai University of International Studies, who argues that the Chinese dragon should not be translated as “dragon”, because it does not represent the same animal as the Western dragon.<sup>56</sup> Zeng suggested the neologism “loong” to avoid confusion with the “long”, or “liong”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>.

<sup>52</sup> KRISTOF, N. D. Chinese Shake up Top Party Group; Free Market Gains. In *The New York Times*, 20 October 1992. [online] [cit. 21 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/20/world/chinese-shake-up-top-party-group-free-market-gains.html>.

<sup>53</sup> CHOW, Yiu Fai. *Me and the Dragon: a Lyrical Engagement with the Politics of Chineseness*, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> CHINANNEWS 習近平：我們是龍的傳人. Xi Jinping: Women shi long de chuanren [Xi Jinping: We are Heirs of the Dragon]. In *Chinanews*, 9 November 2017. [online] [cit. 23 December 2022]. Available from [www.chinanews.com/gn/shipin/2017/11-08/news740297.shtml](http://www.chinanews.com/gn/shipin/2017/11-08/news740297.shtml).

<sup>55</sup> HUANG, Ji 黃 佶. 譯龍風雲——文化負載詞的翻譯：爭議及研究 Fanyi long feng yun – wenhua fuzai ci de fanyi zhengyi ji yanjiu/Loong vs. Dragon Culture-Loaded Words’ Translation: Controversy and Research. In *Loong.cn*, December 2021. [online] [cit. 20 December 2022]. Available from [www.loong.cn/ylyf/default.htm](http://www.loong.cn/ylyf/default.htm).

<sup>56</sup> ZENG, Ling-cai. Western Dragon and Chinese Long: Mistranslation and resolution. In *US-China Foreign Language*, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 9, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

As can be seen from the abovementioned sources, the dragon as a mythological ancestor of all Chinese has officially become a part of the official narrative in mainland China. The natural longing of ordinary people for a common ancestor and the Communist government's need to associate the country with a powerful symbol unwittingly found a common denominator in the dragon. The symbol from the song composed in Taiwan was gradually accepted by ordinary people and politicians, and the phrase "descendants of the dragon" became increasingly popular in mainland China. Therefore, the phrase "we are all descendants of the dragon" combines the romantic spirit of ordinary people with the pragmatism of the Chinese government.

### **The Dragon as a Symbol of Identity for the Chinese Diaspora**

Given how the PRC government applied the symbolism of the dragon as an ancestor of all Chinese people in its political discourse, it is interesting to observe the attitude of the overseas Chinese. Chinese emigration became much more intensive in 1850 – 1950 owing to the defeat of China in the Opium Wars.<sup>58</sup> In 1911, there were about 43 million Chinese living outside of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, residing in 143 countries.<sup>59</sup> There are Chinese of the second or third generation of immigrants, living in Southeast Asia, the USA, Canada, Europe, and so, who have grown up in their new homelands and some of them are even unable to speak Chinese. However, they still maintain their Chinese cultural identity, keep up traditions, and have some romantic feelings for the country their parents or grandparents came from. The new remake of the song by an American Chinese Wang Leehom (Wang Lihong 王力宏) bears witness to this cultural affiliation. Unlike the previous cover versions, this one reflects the feelings and experiences of the Chinese born and grown up in the United States. Wang significantly altered his remake, not only from the musical point of view but also made several changes in the lyrics.

Wang recorded a new version of the song in 2000. He heard his song from his uncle, the singer Li Jianfu, when he visited his family in the 1980s and played the song in Wang's living-room. After several years, he decided to do a remix of the "Descendants of the Dragon" for a new generation. Instead of the Opium wars, he added personal memories related to his family's first years in the United

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<sup>58</sup> SONG, Zhifang. The Global Chinese Diaspora. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, p. 1170.

<sup>59</sup> POSTON, D. L., WONG, Juyin Helen. The Chinese Diaspora: The Current Distribution of the Overseas Chinese Population. In *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 2016, p. 362.

States.<sup>60</sup> Wang mentions the personal experiences of his parents after they arrived in New York from Taiwan, their struggle to survive, and the language barrier. Interestingly, this part of the song (marked in bold) was written and sung in English in a rap style, contrasting with the music and lyrics in Chinese. Later on, he continues with his new lyrics in Chinese, using original music.<sup>61</sup>

**Now here's a story that'll make u cry  
Straight from Taiwan they came  
Just a girl and a homeboy in love  
No money no job no speak no English  
Nobody gonna give'em the time of day in a city so cold  
They made a wish  
And then they had the strength to graduate with honors  
And borrowed 50 just to consummate  
A marriage under GOD  
Who never left their side  
Gave their children pride  
Raise ur voices high  
Love will never die never die...**

多年前寧靜的一個夜 我們全家人到了紐約  
野火呀燒不盡在心間 每夜每天對家的思念

Many years ago on a tranquil night, our whole family arrived in New York  
Nothing can destroy what is in our hearts: every night, every day longing for home

別人土地上我成長 長成以後是龍的傳人  
巨龍巨龍你擦亮眼 永永遠遠的擦亮眼  
巨龍巨龍你擦亮眼 永永遠遠的擦亮眼

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<sup>60</sup> MAKINEN, J. Can Leehom Wang Transcend China and America's Pop Cultures? In *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July 2014. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-ms-leehom-wang-20140704-story.html>

<sup>61</sup> See the new version on Youtube. Leehomwang VEVO. 王力宏 Leehom Wang – 龍的傳人. In *YouTube*, 3 October 2009. [online] [cit. 23 December 2022]. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8T5hu3uz7c&ab\\_channel=leehomwangVEVO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8T5hu3uz7c&ab_channel=leehomwangVEVO). The karaoke version allows listeners to follow up with the lyrics: 王力宏 龍的傳人 Wang Lihong Long de chuanren [Wang Leehom, Heirs of the Dragon] (Official Video Karaoke). In *YouTube*, 28 August 2019. [online] [cit. 23 December 2022]. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSKF8VoQ2UQ&ab\\_channel=%E9%87%91%E6%9B%B2%E5%B9%B4%E4%BB%A3GOLDENERA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSKF8VoQ2UQ&ab_channel=%E9%87%91%E6%9B%B2%E5%B9%B4%E4%BB%A3GOLDENERA).

I grew up in someone else's land, after I grew up I became an heir of the dragon  
Mighty dragon, mighty dragon open your eyes, forever and ever open your eyes  
Mighty dragon, mighty dragon open your eyes, forever and ever open your  
eyes<sup>62</sup>

After the first part, which is identical to that of the original version, he continues with a rap part in English, followed by new lyrics in Chinese. This part of the song carries a message and the experience of a member of the Chinese overseas community, especially the affinity with Chinese culture: "Nothing can destroy what is in our hearts: every night, every day longing for home". Here again, the longing of a Chinese person growing up outside of mainland China becomes clear. As has been mentioned, Wang's remake does not include later changes to Hou's lyrics, and he returns to "Black hair, black eyes, yellow skin".<sup>63</sup> Wang Lijun's embracing of his Chinese roots was so strong that the Beijing authorities appointed him to be the torch bearer of the 2008 Olympics and perform at the closing ceremony.<sup>64</sup>

Wang's personalised cover version shows the importance of the idea of national identity for Chinese growth in a completely different cultural background. The Chinese in the diaspora are facing different problems and despite various cultural backgrounds, the cultural identity, the feeling of belonging to the same Chinese nation, culture or, rather, civilisation, has still a certain importance to most of the Chinese living abroad. Children of immigrants who were born and have been raised in foreign countries are usually fluent in the language of their new country, and growing up surrounded by a different culture makes them often a part of it. In the case of people with Asian roots, they do not always merge into the majority community easily, especially in Western countries. However, the second generation of Chinese immigrants still feels in some way connected with China, and as is clear in the case of Leehom Wang, they tend to have romantic attitudes towards the country their parents originated from. Therefore, the collocation of "descendants of the Dragon" is appealing to many of them. More than forty years after the song was written, some of the young generation of overseas Chinese take this myth to be a part of their cultural identity. In the case of the Chinese diaspora, the interpretation of the "dragon

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<sup>62</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>.

<sup>63</sup> *Long de chuanren* 龍的傳人 [Heirs of the Dragon]. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <http://www.onedayinmay.net/Other/Leehom/HeirsDragon.html>.

<sup>64</sup> MAKINEN, J. Can Leehom Wang Transcend China and America's Pop Cultures? In *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July 2014. [online] [cit. 11 December 2022]. Available from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-ms-leehom-wang-20140704-story.html>.



origin” differs from the Chinese living in mainland China and Taiwan, although some researchers, such as the already mentioned Scott,<sup>65</sup> have recently started to consider Mainlanders in Taiwan as a diaspora. The mighty and majestic image of the dragon can offer them a kind of dignity in being Chinese. This sounds appealing to all of them. The older immigrants still remember a not very positive image of the Chinese minority in the past and even the younger generation still feels overlooked, especially after graduating from the best universities and does not receive a fair and equal chance of professional progress.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

It is hard to believe how deep an influence the song has had on Chinese national identity. The popular patriotic song reflected the longing for a motherland by the Chinese living in Taiwan. Ten years later, it was used by the PRC government. It fulfilled a political need to find a common symbol of Chineseness, to replace the former political narratives used until the end of the 1970s. The dragon, as an apolitical mythological creature was an ideal choice. The idea of the dragon as the common ancestor of all ethnic Chinese throughout the world was acceptable to the Chinese in Taiwan as well as to overseas compatriots. That is the reason why the popular song became suitable as a connecting element, which very quickly became embedded in the Chinese subconscious and became popular not only on the mainland but also among Chinese living outside the territory of the PRC. This proves how easily new myths are created.<sup>67</sup> “*Descendants of the Dragon* is not the only patriotic song composed during the 1970s in Taiwan

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<sup>65</sup> SCOTT, S. Taiwan’s Mainlanders: A Diasporic Identity in Construction. In *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 2006, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 87–105. [online] [cit. 6 April 2023]. Available from <https://journals.openedition.org/remi/2715?lang=en>.

<sup>66</sup> This lack of personal recognition was one of the most important factors when deciding to stay abroad or return to China after graduating from university. After 2000 China succeeded in persuading many Chinese students and educated people to return, offering them lucrative positions. See more in LI, He. Returned Students and Political Change in China. In *Asian Perspective*, 2006, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 5–29. [online] [cit. 7 April 2023] Available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42704542>.

<sup>67</sup> ZHANG CZIRÁKOVÁ, D. Drak ako symbol čínskej národnej identity, jeho symbolika a zobrazovanie v čínskom umení. Úvod do problematiky [The Dragon as a Symbol of Chinese National Identity, its Symbolics and Representation in Chinese Visual Art. An Introduction]. IN BUCKOVÁ, M. (ed.). *Reflexia mytologických motívov v duchovnej a materiálnej kultúre národov Ázie, Afriky a Oceánie* [The Reflection of Mythological Motifs in the Material and Non-Material Culture of the Nations of Asia, Africa and Oceania], pp. 44–45.

describing the beauty of mainland China and its affiliation with the ancient culture. However, the majestic and mostly positive image of the dragon is something that the Chinese people find it easy to identify with. This article has shown the massive influence of the song on several generations of Chinese living in different parts of the world and how it has also significantly helped to construct a narrative of the dragon as the mythological ancestor of all Chinese.

The immense popularity of the song and the recent use of this myth to strengthen Chinese cultural identity by communist leaders in the PRC shows that for the Chinese the dragon is much more than just an old myth. As Hou Dejian, the author of the song, mentioned during the Lunar New Year evening gala programme in 1988, the dragon is unique, because, unlike all other animals in the Chinese calendar, it has been created in the imagination of Chinese people.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, any animal or hero as a creator or an ancestor of a nation is nothing but a kind of myth. These myths and legends have been created by many nations. The reason for this is that they help keep up national identity and give people a feeling of cultural and historical coherence. In the case of the descendants of the dragon, the natural longing of ordinary people for a common national identity coincidentally matches the pragmatic need of the government of the PRC to find an inclusive, unifying symbol for all Chinese people, which would replace the former Communist rhetoric and be widely acceptable also to the Chinese population in Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. As has been mentioned, the Chinese government is trying to impose the narrative of the dragon as a common ancestor for all people living in China, including national minorities, although they usually have their own national symbols. The popular song offered a wonderful opportunity to create the myth of the dragon as a common ancestor. The dragon as a symbol of China started to be used by politicians and it is going to be even more in evidence in the next year of the dragon, 2024, as is clear from online activities.<sup>69</sup> However, the line of the song “they are all the heirs of the dragon”, changed into “we are all the heirs of the dragon”, is often quoted by the authorities, which shows its power to support the narrative.

The cultural identity of young Chinese who were born and have grown up abroad in the Chinese diaspora mentioned in the last part is a very complex problem that needs much more time and space and it cannot be easily answered

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<sup>68</sup> IUUEIEN. 《龍的傳人》的真正作者和原唱 Long De Chuanren De Zhenzheng Zuoze He Yuan Chang [The Real Author and Original Singer of ‘Descendants of the Dragon’]. In *YouTube*, 3 April 2012. [online] [cit. 21. December 2022]. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpVH-KpN\\_VE&ab\\_channel=%E7%8E%8B%E9%91%AB](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpVH-KpN_VE&ab_channel=%E7%8E%8B%E9%91%AB).

<sup>69</sup> For more activities dedicated to the Dragon (Loong) year, see <http://www.loong.cn/default.htm>.

just by simply applying one narrative. It differs from country to country depending on the cultural, political and economic circumstances of Chinese immigrants. It requires closer examination of the historical transformations of overseas Chinese communities in various parts of the world. The situation of the Chinese living in South-East Asia is radically different from that of the American-born Chinese represented by Leehom Wang, and from the circumstances in Western Europe, which are not the same as in East Europe. To put it simply said, the two most important issues that define the Chinese diaspora are Chineseness and transnationalism, but their attitude to the motherland and its culture also depends on the position of the Chinese minority in their new homeland, their acceptance by the majority society, their social status et cetera.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the perception of the national character of overseas Chinese and their self-identification should be a subject for future research. However, as shown by the example of Leehom Wang, even though the original song sounds a bit outdated, it was still appealing enough to spawn a remake. The new myth of raising Chinese self-confidence became popular and it is often brought up in conversation by people living in the Chinese diaspora in Slovakia, Austria, Hungary and Poland.<sup>71</sup>

As shown above, the success of establishing the dragon as a symbol of China and a common ancestor is closely connected with a popular song.

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<sup>70</sup> See further in SONG, Zhifang. Global Chinese Diaspora. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, pp.1168–1183.

<sup>71</sup> I witnessed it often during my frequent contacts with people from the Chinese diaspora in Slovakia and neighbouring countries, during my more than twenty years working as an official translator.

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